

Party Watch Annual Report 2022

Seeking Progress While Maintaining Stability 稳中求进

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Party Watch Annual Report

 Center For
Advanced China Research

Edited by Molly Henry

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The Center for Advanced China Research (CACR) is a non-profit research organization that conducts Chinese-language research on China's domestic politics, foreign affairs, and security policy. CACR engages with US and partner-country policymakers, China specialists, and the broader public through the production of high-quality analysis of Chinese politics in the form of regular reports, blog posts, and contributions to scholarly publications. CACR is an independent, non-partisan 501(c)3 tax-exempt organization located in Washington, DC.

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The editor would like to thank Daniel Fu for his editorial contributions.

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The Shanghai Lockdown and the Politics of Zero-Covid in China

By Dali L. Yang

At the end of March 2022, Shanghai, China's wealthiest city and a global economic center, went into a harrowing lockdown that lasted two months. While many cities in China went through partial or complete lockdowns and some were under lockdown for longer periods than Shanghai's, Shanghai's experience deserves special attention because of its scale, the light it sheds on the politics of zero-Covid, the challenge it posed to China's zero-Covid strategy, and the lessons it produced for China's subsequent pivot from zero-Covid.

In the rest of the article, I first describe the Shanghai model of precision *fangkong* (prevention and control) for COVID-19 response and the challenges it faced in Spring 2022 with the rise in cases of the Omicron BA.2 variant. I then report on how Shanghai experts and policymakers sought to control the outbreak while arguing against using the lockdown option for Shanghai because of its pivotal role in the Chinese economy. The rest of the chapter reports on the imposition of a de facto lockdown by the national leadership and the national campaign to support the lockdown of Shanghai. Within the constraints of space, an effort is also made to convey the distress that followed as residents were caught unprepared in the prolonged and stringent lockdown, as well as the acute pressures on the rank and file of the party-state hierarchy and grassroots organizations. As the authorities steadily escalated the enforcement of highly intrusive restrictions on residents in their desperate pursuit of zero-Covid, public fear of the zero-Covid enforcement measures also spread. The Shanghai lockdown not only revealed the severe limitations of using a precision *fangkong* approach to contain the Omicron variant but also put into stark relief the vast costs of pursuing zero-Covid.

The Shanghai Precision *Fangkong* Model

Until early March 2022, Shanghai was China's model performer for effective Covid response and good governance. Whereas many cities employed costly mass PCR testing of their entire populations as a *fangkong* measure, Shanghai, supported by the Shanghai Municipal CDC and its Institute of Infectious Disease Prevention and Treatment, eschewed the mass testing approach through March of 2022.¹ In early March, 2022, however, experts in Shanghai (and the China CDC) discovered cases of the highly contagious Omicron variant scattered across the city and indications

¹ Wang Hui (王慧), "Shanghai Center for Disease Prevention and Control Communicative Disease Control Office: In Defense of the People's Health, They're Online 24 Hours" [上海市疾病预防控制中心传染病防治所：守卫人民健康，他们24小时在线], *Worker's Daily Online*, January 21, 2022, <http://www.workercn.cn/34167/202201/21/220121165951076.shtml>.

of significant community transmission.² As more and more cases were identified in the community, Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang convened an emergency meeting of the municipal Covid *fangkong* leadership group on March 8 to review the situation and demand more aggressive responses. First, lockdowns and shutdowns of selected communities, hospitals, and schools were implemented to help achieve “clearing on the social front.”³ Next, the Shanghai health leadership stepped up testing, central quarantining, and management of close contacts. Over March 16-17, a total of more than 14 million samples were collected, covering more than 7 million people.⁴ By March 18, the city had identified and controlled 17,875 close contacts and 49,140 secondary close contacts.⁵

Shanghai Could Not Afford to Lock Down

For much of March, the official goal in Shanghai was to cut off the chains of transmission and achieve zero-Covid in targeted communities. However, Dr. Wu Fan, Deputy Dean of the Shanghai Medical School and former head of the Shanghai Municipal CDC, explained, “If there is large-scale community transmission, the premise and conditions for such an approach are no longer met.”⁶ Because the hyper-contagious Omicron variant tends to spread asymptotically in a highly vaccinated population, it became extraordinarily difficult for the *fangkong* system to identify all infections and cut off the transmission chains.

With each passing day, concern grew among Shanghai’s public health professionals.⁷ A citywide lockdown was likely among the options that the Shanghai leadership submitted to the national leadership for review and instruction. On March 17, Xi Jinping used a Politburo Standing

² “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#117)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会（第 117 场）], People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 7, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1721675/1721675.htm>.

³ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#121)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会(第 121 场)] People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 13, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1721645/1721645.htm>.

⁴ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#128)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会(第 128 场)] People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 20, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1721990/1721990.htm>.

⁵ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#126)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会(第 126 场)] People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 18, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1721965/1721965.htm>.

⁶ “Wu Fan Explains Shanghai’s New [Pandemic] Prevention and Control Policy: Our Methods Have Changes, Our Scientific Precision Has Not” [吴凡解读上海防疫新策：打法变了，科学精准不变], *People’s Daily Online*, March 19, 2022, <https://news.cctv.com/2022/03/19/ARTIvxs0yj0vAzCY9Y7E97Fr220319.shtml>.

⁷ Qian Tongxin (钱童心), “Why the New Diagnostic and Treatment Criteria Don’t Mention Asymptomatic Cases—How Zhang Wenhong Responds [新版诊疗方案为何未提及无症状者, 张文宏这样回应], *Yicai via Science and Technology Daily*, March 18, 2022, <http://www.stdaily.com/cehua/Mar29th/202203/349690b5c6734bd1b9920c66a500b359.shtml>.

Committee meeting to ask officials to “strive to achieve the maximal prevention and control effect with the lowest possible cost, and minimize the epidemic impact on economic and social development.”⁸ In tandem, the State Council Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism (JPCM) issued revised guidance against indiscriminate mass testing of an entire municipal population.⁹ After this, the Shanghai leadership chose to bet on broadening and enhancing existing precision *fangkong* measures. The day after the Politburo Standing Committee meeting, Dr. Wu Fan invoked “scientific decision-making” to explain the need to go beyond precision *fangkong* measures and conduct PCR tests on targeted populations.¹⁰ Importantly, Wu explained that the lockdown of Shanghai was not an option because Shanghai “plays an irreplaceably vital role to China's economic and social development.”¹¹ Thus, Shanghai ratcheted up its *fangkong* efforts against the Omicron variant in March while excluding the lockdown option.

Given the hyper-infectiousness of the Omicron variant, this decision was in essence tempting fate. By March 18, the timing and location of new cases demonstrated significant community transmission.¹² While Shanghai expanded testing to cover the city's population, Dr. Wu Jingli, Director General of the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission, stated that increased screening would not be combined with mandatory controls and that the restrictions on “priority” areas would be lifted when they were found to have no positive cases.¹³ Wu and other public health officials expressed optimism about the effectiveness of advanced screening measures. Unfortunately, the trend in the number of Covid cases failed to follow expert projections. As the number of cases climbed, the goal of realizing zero-covid became increasingly elusive and the medical system began to feel the pressure.

The Calls for and Resistance to Lockdown

On March 22, Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang and Mayor Gong Zheng met with the Fifth Supervision Team from the State Council JPCM. Li Qiang began by saying that Shanghai “resolutely implements the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important speech and instructions, follows the guidance and requirements of the State Council JPCM ... and has made dealing with the outbreak the top priority.” He thus revealed that he had Xi's support for the

⁸ “Politburo Standing Committee Convenes Meeting, Xi Jinping Chairs” [中共中央政治局常务委员会召开会议, 习近平主持会议], Xinhua, March 17, 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0317/c64094-32377693.html>.

⁹ “District Organization, Implementation, and Guidance on Novel Coronavirus Nucleic Acid Testing (3rd Edition)” [新型冠状病毒核酸检测组织实施指南(第三版)], PRC National Health Commission Medical Governance Department, March 18, 2022, <http://www.nhc.gov.cn/zyygj/s7659/202203/b5aaa96dfe1b4f14b19bf2f888a10673.shtml>.

¹⁰ “Politburo Standing Committee Convenes Meeting, Xi Jinping Chairs,” March 17, 2022.

¹¹ “Wu Fan Explains Shanghai's New [Pandemic] Prevention and Control Policy.”

¹² “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#126).”

¹³ Ibid.

measures Shanghai was taking.¹⁴ Promising to do everything possible to respond to the guidance and criticisms from the Supervision Team, Li Qiang vowed to further enhance Shanghai's *fangkong* capabilities and "build an impenetrable wall of epidemic prevention and control."¹⁵ At the same time, the number of newly identified cases in Shanghai jumped into four figures per day. There was much speculation that Shanghai would have no choice but to lock down. To quell the speculative frenzy, Shanghai police announced on March 23 that they were investigating two individuals for posting online that Shanghai would lock down.¹⁶ The next day, *China Daily* quoted Wu Jinglei in an article titled "Shanghai Has No Plans For City Lockdown."¹⁷

Yet, the pressure on Shanghai was growing in proportion to the pressure of Covid case spillovers into dozens of other cities in neighboring Jiangsu and Zhejiang Provinces. As these provinces reported the spillover cases from Shanghai to the National Health Commission and the State Council JPCM, they also put pressure on the national authorities with respect to the situation in Shanghai. Li Huanlong, deputy expert lead of the Zhejiang Provincial Epidemiologist Team, pointed out that the middle road Shanghai had adopted to respond to the outbreaks had limited effectiveness in cutting off population movement and thus could only slow down the epidemic.¹⁸ To minimize cases coming from Shanghai, local authorities in the vicinity of Shanghai and beyond went into high alert, enacting strict measures that quickly impinged on Shanghai's commercial interactions with the rest of China.

At this point, the divergence between Shanghai and the national leadership became palpable. As late as the morning of March 26, there was no indication that Shanghai would change its course. When Dr. Wu Fan joined Dr. Wu Jinglei for the daily press briefing that morning, she affirmed the effectiveness of testing and screening in Shanghai and was emphatic that Shanghai was too important for the country and the world to be put under lockdown.¹⁹ Instead, she appealed to all Shanghai residents to show their "big picture perspective" and participate in PCR screening, now supplemented with rapid antigen testing, so that infected individuals could be identified. Shanghai

¹⁴ "State Council Joint Prevention and Control Mechanism's Fifth Inspection Group Visit to Shanghai Launching Inspection Work" [国务院联防联控机制第五督查组赴上海开展督查工作], *Caixin*, March 22, 2022, <https://china.caixin.com/m/2022-03-22/101859606.html>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Shanghai Municipal Public Security Bureau Intelligence Notice [上海市公安局警情通报], March 23, 2022, on file.

¹⁷ Xing Yi, "Shanghai Has No Plans For City Lockdown," *China Daily*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202203/24/WS623bdda5a310fd2b29e53056.html>.

¹⁸ Liu Wenyang (刘文阳), "25 Million People's Model of Fighting the Pandemic Enters Territory-Wide Static Management, When Will the Shanghai Epidemic Welcome a Turning Point?" [2500 万人口的抗疫模范生全域静态管理, 上海疫情何时迎来拐点?], *Health World*, 2022-03-31, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20220331/20220331A0CN5B00.html>.

¹⁹ "Why Can't Shanghai Lock Down? Wu Fan Explains the Reason: 'Shanghai is Not Only Belonging to Shanghai People'" [上海为何不能封城? 吴凡详解原因: 上海不仅仅是上海人民自己的上海], *The Paper*, March 26, 2022, <https://news.sina.cn/2022-03-26/detail-imcwiwss8221276.d.html>.

could “achieve dynamic zero-Covid and restore normal daily life with the smallest cost and the fastest speed,” she stated.²⁰

The Imposition of Two-Stage Lockdown in the Name of “Strict Closed-off Management”

Dr. Wu Fan publicly noted that Shanghai was engaged in exploring a path for Covid response and control that diverged from the draconian zero-Covid measures adopted elsewhere.²¹ In view of China’s political structure and Xi Jinping’s dominance on national Covid policy, the Shanghai “exploration” under Party Secretary Li Qiang most likely had Xi’s blessing. The statements by Dr. Wu Fan and others indicated clearly that experts in Shanghai and most likely the municipal leadership did not intend to lock the city down. In any case, given Xi’s pivotal leadership role, it was widely recognized that Shanghai’s leaders were in no position to make the decision on whether to lock the city down.²²

For Xi and the national leadership, the COVID-19 eruptions in Hong Kong and Jilin presented powerful evidence of the dangers of viral spread. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan was sent to Jilin Province in the second half of March to guide local authorities struggling to control the epidemic. In the meantime, the images and information from Hong Kong, a model of containment success in 2020-2021, were especially concerning. Xi Jinping had earlier directed Hong Kong to take control of the outbreak “the overriding mission.”²³ However, the number of cases in Hong Kong surged to more than 60,000 per day (7-day averaged) in early March and the total number of cases surpassed one million by mid-March in a population of about 7.5 million.²⁴ Most shockingly, Hong Kong reported the world’s highest COVID-19 death rate then because its elderly population was poorly vaccinated for Covid.²⁵ Such numbers and images of Hong Kong Covid patients on stretchers in the streets were especially shocking to health policy advisers in Beijing. Whereas experts in Shanghai saw mild COVID-19 symptoms in Shanghai, national public health experts led by Liang Wannian, leader of the NHC expert group for epidemic handling, told the public that the case fatality rate for those infected by the Omicron variant was 7 to 8 times that of the

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Yan Yucheng (严雨程), Wei Xiaoning (韦晓宁), “Infections Increase 3500 Per Day, Shanghai Locks Down Based on the [Huangpu] River” 感染者日增 3500 例, 上海“划江而封,” *HealthInsight*, March 27, 2022, <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/488687322>.

²² See, e.g., the discussion on Zhihu at the thread “Up Until March 25, 2022, Why Hasn’t Shanghai Locked Down?” [截至 2022 年 3 月 25 日, 为什么上海到现在还不封城?], Zhihu, <https://www.zhihu.com/question/523805402>; and “Why Hasn’t Shanghai Locked Down Yet?” 上海为什么还不封城? <https://www.zhihu.com/question/524303591>, Zhihu, accessed March 26, 2022.

²³ Andrew Silver, “China’s President Orders Hong Kong to Control Outbreak,” *BMJ*, 2022-02-17, <https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o420>.

²⁴ Hong Kong COVID-19 Data available at HKSAR Government Dashboard (<https://chp-dashboard.geodata.gov.hk/covid-19/en.html>).

²⁵ Luke Taylor, “Hong Kong Reports World’s Highest Death Rate As Zero Covid Strategy Fails,” *BMJ*, 2022-03-17, <https://www.bmj.com/content/376/bmj.o707>; Pak-Hin Hinson Cheung, Chi-Ping Chan, and Dong-Yan Jin. “Lessons learned from the fifth wave of COVID-19 in Hong Kong in early 2022.” *Emerging Microbes & Infections* 11, no. 1 (2022): 1072-1078.

seasonable flu. For those aged 80 or above, Liang stated, the case fatality rate was more than 10 percent, or about 100 times the severity of the flu.²⁶

In this context, Xi Jinping intervened decisively. In the evening of March 27, the Shanghai leadership, in the name of the Shanghai Covid *Fangkong* Leadership Group, announced that, beginning on March 28, the city would enter a two-stage phased lockdown (officially called strict closed-off management, 严格封控管理) of four days each coupled with mandatory Covid testing: first in the areas east of the Huangpu River (Pudong and adjacent districts, March 28-April 1) and then in the rest of the city (April 1-April 5).²⁷ It was later revealed that the Shanghai leadership made this decision “under the guidance of the National Expert Group.”²⁸ However, the Shanghai leadership used language that bore Xi Jinping’s distinctive colloquial style to signal that the more vigorous anti-epidemic measures had Xi’s imprimatur.²⁹

Remarkably, as Shanghai was induced into suspended animation, none of Shanghai’s top municipal leaders appeared at the daily press briefings to explain the situation or speak to the public.³⁰ At the March 28 press briefing, it fell to Dr. Wu Jinglei, Gu Jun (Municipal Commerce Commission Director General), and Dr. Wu Fan to respond to reporters on the lockdown measures. While Dr. Wu Jinglei described the broad contours of the two-stage lockdown, Dr. Wu Fan, who had been the public face saying that Shanghai would not be put under lockdown, now explained that these “more decisive and resolute measures”—the rolling “strict closed-off management”—were needed to further reduce human mobility, “quickly identify infected individuals, and completely eliminate hidden community transmission of the virus.” She portrayed these steps as the optimization of *fangkong* measures toward the goal of clearing the virus on the societal front. Residents would not step foot outside their homes except for Covid testing. “Hopefully, we can

²⁶ Shi Yingchun (史迎春), “Liang Wannian: Omicron is Not a Bad Flu, It has 7-to-8 Times the Death Rate of Flu “梁万年: 奥密克戎不是大号流感, 病死率是流感的 7 到 8 倍,” CCTV, April 24, 2022, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202204/24/WS6264b8eba3101c3ee7ad2133.html>.

²⁷ “Report On Doing the First Round of City-Wide Nucleic Acid Screening Work” [关于做好全市新一轮核酸筛查工作的通告], *Shanghai Publishes* (Shanghai Municipal Government Information Office), March 27, 2022, <https://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/xwfb/20220327/b9d985cedb4042a2843fb8b108c401f4.html>; “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#136)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会(第 136 场)] People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 28, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1722475/1722475.htm>.

²⁸ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#139)” [上海举行新冠肺炎疫情防控工作新闻发布会(第 139 场)] People’s Government of Shanghai News Office, March 31, 2022, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/xwfbh/gssxwfbh/xwfbh/shanghai/Document/1722624/1722624.htm>.

²⁹ “Last Night, Shanghai’s New Word to Fight the Pandemic: What’s ‘Compacting the Harvested Land’?” [昨晚上海的一个抗疫新词: 什么是‘压茬’?], *Teacher Speaks New Knowledge*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H3I9PUAH0552AGH6.html>.

³⁰ The top Shanghai leadership included Party Secretary Li Qiang and two deputy party secretaries (including Mayor Gong Zheng) at the time. Li and Gong co-headed the Municipal Covid *Fangkong* Leadership Group. The lineup on the mayor’s side included eight deputy mayors.

achieve zero clearance as quickly as possible,” she said.³¹ A source with good knowledge of health policymaking in Shanghai during this period told me that Dr. Wu Fan had to make an internal self-criticism for publicly stating that Shanghai should not be put under lockdown.

The Siege

Whereas Shanghai East had expected to have the lockdown lifted on April 1, it was not to be. “In the afternoon on March 28, the CCP Central Committee Politburo convened to review/study relevant work of the near future,” according to the tersest Xinhua release on a Politburo meeting in a long time.³² Nothing was said publicly about the substance of this Politburo meeting, but it was certain that the Shanghai situation was on the agenda. Both Shanghai Party Secretary Li Qiang and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan were members of the Politburo. The timing of this meeting made it evident that Xi and the Politburo directed the Shanghai leadership to dramatically escalate the epidemic control measures. To preserve the veneer of provincial-level responsibility for health issues, national intervention was at this point mostly behind the scenes.

As the case numbers from the PCR screening of the eastern half of Shanghai began to come in, it was obvious that there was significant community transmission. On March 30, 329 of the 355 newly confirmed Covid cases were identified in the community, as were 821 of the 5,298 asymptomatic cases.”³³ Full PCR test screening of the western half of the city had yet to commence. One can imagine the consultations involving political leaders and experts for Shanghai and the State Council JPCM/NHC amid pressure from the national leadership and especially Xi Jinping to deliver on controlling the outbreak. More than a month later, Xi Jinping and Politburo Standing Committee would publicly point to the Shanghai leadership’s “inadequacies” in understanding, preparation, and *fangkong* work.³⁴

In the evening of March 30, the Shanghai leadership convened an all-city cadre meeting, with video links to the leaders of every Street and Town (the lowest rungs of urban party-government structure). Party Secretary Li Qiang, who had previously served as a top aide to Xi Jinping, reviewed the work that had been done. He admitted that, internally, there were “inadequacies in our work, understanding, and preparation, especially [recognizing] some *fangkong* measures have

³¹ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#136).”

³² “Xi Jinping and Other Leading Comrades Express Condolences to Affected Compatriots Following Eastern Airlines Accident” [习近平等领导同志向东航飞行事故遇难同胞默哀], *People’s Daily*, March 29, 2022, <http://cpc.people.com.cn/n1/2022/0329/c64093-32386608.html>.

³³ “Shanghai Holds Press Conference on Novel Coronavirus Influenza Pandemic Prevention and Control Work (#139).”

³⁴ “Politburo Standing Committee Convenes Meeting, Xi Jinping Chairs” [中共中央政治局常务委员会召开会议, 习近平主持会议], Xinhua, May 5, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-05/05/content_5688712.htm.

not been properly carried out or implemented.”³⁵ He called on all officials to “resolutely implement the spirit of General Secretary Xi Jinping's important speech and instructions,” assume responsibility, further mobilize and step up, to ensure the completion of the PCR testing. He then announced the adoption of “comprehensive *fangkong* measures, including static management, PCR screening, epidemiological investigation, and cleaning and disinfection in all areas and for all people.”³⁶ For all practical purposes, Li Qiang declared Shanghai's de facto full lockdown in the form of “territory-wide static management(全域静态管理).” The goal was to “truly control at-risk groups and achieve societal clearance [of Covid cases] as soon as possible.”³⁷

A National Campaign on and in Shanghai

Once Shanghai entered de facto lockdown, it also became, like Wuhan in early 2020, the focus of a national campaign. However, unlike during the Wuhan lockdown, Xi Jinping largely stayed behind the scenes on the Shanghai epidemic situation. He gave frequent internal instructions but used the Politburo for key decisions. Vice Premier Sun Chunlan was the leader of the Central Guiding Group in Wuhan/Hubei and had served as the superintendent of epidemic responses in other places for the past two years. In the morning of April 2, Sun rushed from Jilin Province to Shanghai to oversee *fangkong* efforts on behalf of the national leadership: “in order to thoroughly carry out the important instructions of General Secretary Xi Jinping and implement the requirements of Premier Li Keqiang.”³⁸

For the remainder of the Shanghai campaign, Vice Premier Sun represented the central authorities as the superintendent of zero-Covid policy. Shanghai, China's largest city and economic powerhouse, was literally in Covid receivership as far as the national leadership was concerned. Put another way, though Shanghai had sought to strike out on a gentler path in dealing with Covid, it was being forced to follow the zero tolerance dictates of the national zero-Covid policy.

The Xinhua report on Sun's first day in Shanghai was packed with information and political meaning. Sun “conveyed General Secretary Xi Jinping's concern and well wishes to the vast number of cadres and the masses.” She emphasized the necessity of “adhering to the general

³⁵ Li Qiang 李强, “Speech at City-wide Meeting of Leading Cadres” [在全市领导干部大会上的讲话], March 30, 2022, pdf version on file.

³⁶ “Resolutely Win the Large and Tough Battle of Pandemic Prevention and Control! City-wide Meeting of Leading Cadres Convened Tonight, Again Mobilizing, Deploying, and Implementing [Measures] For Pandemic Prevention and Control Work” [坚决打赢疫情防控大仗硬仗！全市领导干部大会今晚举行，对疫情防控工作进行再动员再部署再落实], *Shanghai Publishes* (Shanghai Municipal Government Information Office), March 30, 2022, <https://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/xwfb/20220330/ae01a0c6ed9143c5a5404b60cdf3537e.html>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Sun Chunlan Visits Shanghai for Inspection and Research: Send Our Best Into the Fight, Use Speed to Fight Speed [of Infection], Control the Pandemic's Spread in the Shortest Time” [孙春兰赴上海调研：尽锐出战，以快制快，用最短时间遏制疫情扩散], *Xinhua*, April 2, 2022, http://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2022-04/02/content_5683306.htm.

principle of ‘dynamic zero clearance’ without hesitating or wavering,” urging Shanghai to take decisive measures to detect, quarantine, treat as needed.³⁹ She stated that personnel and resources were mobilized to support Shanghai and win this “big and hard battle.”⁴⁰ In remarks that reminded readers of the arduous battles in Wuhan more than two years earlier, she exhorted local officials and experts to conduct testing and investigations thoroughly and to expand the capacity of quarantine centers and designated hospitals to house all who needed to be quarantined or treated.⁴¹ The essence of these instructions were later captured in the emphatic words of Liang Wannian, the head of the expert team of the NHC Covid Response Leading Team: “Dynamic zero clearance remains the general principle for Shanghai’s fight against the epidemic, and it must be unswervingly implemented.”⁴²

Vice Premier Sun was attentive to general policies, such as the need to build quarantine capacity, as well as to implementation details. A Shanghai journalistic source revealed that Madame Sun was blunt in pointing to deficiencies in the PCR testing arrangements within hours of her arrival and forced major changes. This stage of the response also saw the mobilization of national and regional resources and personnel. In March through mid-May, more than 37,000 personnel belonging to 22 medical teams—from other provinces and the People’s Liberation Army-- joined in the campaign in Shanghai from the rest of China.⁴³ Especially prominent was the help from neighboring Jiangsu, which fielded multiple medial and diagnostic teams numbering more than 14,000 people. Unlike in Wuhan, large numbers of medical professionals in Shanghai hospitals were enlisted to help take swab samples for PCR testing rather than being deployed to care for Covid patients.⁴⁴ There were indications that security reinforcements were also brought in from other provinces.⁴⁵

The Party-State Hierarchy and Pressure from Top-Down Demands

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² “Expert Liang Wannian Discusses the Shanghai Pandemic: Dynamic zero clearance remains the general principle for Shanghai’s fight against the epidemic, and it must be unswervingly implemented” [专家梁万年谈上海防疫：动态清零是上海防疫的总方针，必须坚定不移执行], *Shanghai Observer*, April 20, 2022, <https://j.021east.com/p/1649594565044445>.

⁴³ “Sincere Thanks to Our Sister Provinces and Cities and the PLA, We Commend the Warriors in White Who Went Against the Tide to Selflessly Contribute! Li Qiangong Sends Off Medical Teams From Sichuan and Hebei Who Aided Shanghai” [衷心感谢兄弟省市区和解放军，致敬逆行出征无私奉献的白衣战士！李强龚正分别为四川河北援沪医疗队送行], *Shanghai Publishes* (Shanghai Municipal Government Information Office), May 14, 2022, <http://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/xwfb/20220514/0c5e5cec18134aacb7458ed9601b5cb5.html>.

⁴⁴ Huang Yangzi (黄杨子), Gu Yong (顾泳), Wang Yunyi (王蕴懿), “We’ve Set Off! Sampling [Test] Medical Staff Carry out Comprehensive Screening in Every Corner of the Community,” [我们出发！采样医护深入社区角落全面筛查], *Shanghai Observer*, April 4, 2022, <https://www.jfdaily.com/news/detail?id=468718>.

⁴⁵ Lin T’ing-yü (林庭贇), “The Shanghai Pandemic is Out of Control! Large Numbers of Armed Police are Stationed There, Stationed with Guns in Doorways” [上海疫情失控！大批武警进驻，持枪站家门口], FTV News via Yahoo, April 4, 2022, <https://tw.news.yahoo.com/上海疫情失控-大批武警进驻-持枪站家门口-015142627.html>; social media short videos.

In many ways, key pieces of the toolkit for bringing Wuhan under control were again used in Shanghai. Unlike in Wuhan, however, Shanghai was able to impose strict home confinement of targeted populations rapidly once it went into de facto lockdown.

An April 6 Commentator's article in the *Liberation Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, made the top-down political dynamics clear while also recognizing the societal challenges facing the Shanghai leadership:

The Central (authorities) have instructed Shanghai to be resolute and decisive, to act quickly and forcefully, and step up the testing, admittance, quarantine, and treatment of all necessary cases; the Municipal Party Committee demands that we follow the commands of the Party Central Committee and the State Council, confront and overcome difficulties, and resolutely fight to win this big and hard battle; and the residents and masses uniformly wish for the epidemic to be contained as soon as possible and to return to normal production and life as soon as possible.⁴⁶

The pursuit of zero-Covid was about identifying infections and controlling the population for the purpose of reducing infections. It was fundamentally about mobilizing the party-state to differentiate the population by infection risk and confine them to their residences or in quarantine quarters and hospitals. Shanghai is administratively divided into 16 districts, within which cadres and staff at the Street/Town levels were tasked as well as empowered with overseeing, managing, and assisting residents in the communities. They, in turn, leaned on the residents' committees to manage the front-line details. The *Liberation Daily* article of April 6 exhorted leading cadres at all levels to show courage and do their utmost to lead in fulfilling the demands placed on them. It paid special attention to the pressures facing grassroots cadres and frontline workers and urged officials to support and empower them.⁴⁷

The compulsory quarantine campaign put inordinate pressure on the health system as well as grassroots leaders, staff and volunteers. City and district health officials suffered physical and mental health crises from the strain.⁴⁸ On the local level, officials and health workers were also under strain. Technically self-governing residents' committees under Party leadership functioned primarily as extensions of the Party-state during the Shanghai lockdown. The thinly staffed groups

⁴⁶ *Liberation Daily* Commentator, "Share the Concerns of the Grassroots, Resolve Problems for the Regular People" [为基层分忧, 为百姓解难], *Liberation Daily* via *Shanghai Observer*, April 6, 2022, <https://export.shobserver.com/qutt/html/469137.html>.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Guo Rui, "Death of Shanghai Health Worker Sparks Online Zero-Covid Anguish," *South China Morning Post*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3174364/death-shanghai-health-worker-sparks-online-zero-covid-anguish>; Daniel Ren, "Shanghai's Top Health Official Hospitalized For Migraine," *South China Morning Post*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/business/article/3174923/shanghais-top-health-official-hospitalised-migraine-pressure-keeping-city>; social media posting of Wu's hospital admission information.

were tasked with a massive amount of work and leaned heavily on property ownership staff, homeowner associations, and volunteers.⁴⁹

How grassroots communities coped with the lockdown depended heavily on their varying resources and capabilities. Even before the lockdown, grassroots cadres and staff in many local communities were already under great pressure to fulfill the tasks of Covid *fangkong*. They now also needed to help meet growing community needs for access to necessities and medicine.⁵⁰ In much of April, there was acute pressure in many communities to “dispose of” the growing number of infected individuals and their close contacts. Multiple recordings of resident conversations with community officials and medical staff members revealed that the staff were overwhelmed with demands and anguished by their inability to offer help to those in need.⁵¹ Exhausted by the avalanche of ever-changing top-down demands, some Street Office leaders published anguished resignation letters.⁵²

The Lockdown Severely Affected Access to Medical Services

One justification that is often advanced in favor of lockdowns is that they reduce the number of COVID-19-related deaths while preventing the healthcare system from being overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients, thus making the healthcare system available for non-Covid patients.⁵³ In reality, the Shanghai lockdown drastically limited access to emergency medical services and care for those with serious chronic conditions, thus repeating the major mistakes that had earlier plagued Wuhan and Xi'an. This was particularly disastrous for the elderly.⁵⁴ Unknown to the public at the time, nursing homes and elderly care facilities in Shanghai were hit hard in March, especially because the vaccination rate for seniors in Shanghai was below average for China. Few deaths in these facilities were classified and reported as Covid-related.⁵⁵ Patients of all ages in

⁴⁹ Xiaoyi Sun and Ronggui Huang, "Extension of State-Led Growth Coalition and Grassroots Management: A Case Study of Shanghai." *Urban Affairs Review* 52, no. 6 (2016): 917-943; Mujun Zhou, "Debating the State in Private Housing Neighborhoods: The Governance of Homeowners' Associations in Urban Shanghai," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38, no. 5 (2014): 1849-1866.

⁵⁰ Bao Zhiming (包志明), "Shanghai: The Failure of Precision Prevention and Control" [上海: 精准防控的失控], *Caixin Weekly*, April 4, 2020, <https://weekly.caixin.com/2022-04-02/101864942.html>; "Vicky," "In the Shanghai Pandemic, My Slap in the Face Was Not the Data, But the Residents' Committee" [上海疫情, 给我一耳光的不是数据, 是居委会], Weibo post, March 27, 2022, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/Shc6HRJ8sk1-YFRG-iUNig>.

⁵¹ Christian Shepherd and Vic Chiang, "China Tries To Cover Lockdown Strains On Shanghai's Front-Line Workers," *Washington Post*, April 18, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/18/shanghai-china-covid-xi-media/>.

⁵² One of the most poignant letters is by Wu Yingchuan, Secretary of the Changli Garden Residential Area Party Branch (dated April 7, 2022).

⁵³ Ari Joffe, "COVID-19: Rethinking the Lockdown Groupthink," *Frontiers in Public Health*, February 26, 2021, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.625778/full>; Gideon Meyerowitz-Katz, Samir Bhatt, Oliver Ratmann, Jan Markus Brauner, Seth Flaxman, Swapnil Mishra, Mrinank Sharma et al. "Is the cure really worse than the disease? The health impacts of lockdowns during COVID-19." *BMJ Global Health* 6, no. 8 (2021): e006653.

⁵⁴ Assessment by a front-line physician in Shanghai, May 1, 2022.

⁵⁵ He Jifeng (何及锋), "This is What's Really Happening in Shanghai's Eldercare Homes..." [这是上海养老院正在

Shanghai faced difficulties gaining permission to leave their homes, obtaining transportation, and being admitted and treated at hospitals. These and other obstacles to emergency aid, treatment of chronic illness, and mental healthcare contributed to tragic deaths, most of which have received scant attention in the official press. A volunteer effort to document and commemorate deaths from the lockdown identified more than 200 individuals who died at least partly from being denied access to medical care.⁵⁶ To put these numbers in context, the Shanghai authorities did not officially announce any deaths from Covid until April 18. When they did, most of the fatalities were of unvaccinated seniors with underlying illnesses. The official number of Covid-related deaths in the city stood at 595 as of June 11, 2022. However, reports from crematoriums suggest a significant increase in the number of deaths in Shanghai during this period.⁵⁷

A City of Severe Shortages

The March 27 announcement from the Shanghai *Fangkong* Office had stated that essential services would continue to operate, and food and necessities would be well supplied and reasonably priced.⁵⁸ With its reputation for good governance, the lessons of lockdowns in Wuhan and elsewhere, and repeated statements that Shanghai would not be under lockdown, what else would one expect for this city known for variety, sophistication, and meticulous attention to detail? However, shortages came to define the Shanghai lockdown, with many citizens unable to secure sufficient food and necessities before the city's unexpected shutdown which was further extended beyond initially announced dates. Delivery and logistics services were also severely disrupted, creating chaos as well as rent-seeking opportunities for the well-connected.⁵⁹ A government-managed system of sanctioned suppliers and group-purchases was inefficient, exploited by profiteering middlemen, and often provided poor quality food.⁶⁰

By the time the *Liberation Daily* editorial appeared, Shanghai residents were already caught in widespread shortages of food, necessities, and emergency medical services. According to the

发生的事情.....], April 21, 2022, on file.

⁵⁶ "A List of Shanghai's Deceased From Illness" [上海病逝者名单], accessed June 8, 2022, <https://airtable.com/shrQw3CYR9N14a4iw/tblTv0f9KVySJACSN>.

⁵⁷ "The Aftermath of the Handling of the Shanghai Funeral Home Event" [上海殡仪馆事件处理后续], "Green Powder" via NetEase, April 22, 2022, post removed, on file.

⁵⁸ "Notice on a New Round of City-wide Nucleic Acid Screening Work" [关于做好全市新一轮核酸筛查工作的通告], *Shanghai Publishes*, March 27, 2022, <https://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/xwfb/20220327/b9d985cedb4042a2843fb8b108c401f4.html>.

⁵⁹ Murong Xuecun (慕容雪村), "Why There Could Be Famine in Shanghai" [上海人为什么会饥饿], *China Digital Times*, April 9, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/679270.html>; Li Yuan, "Covid Lockdowns Revive the Ghosts of a Planned Economy," *New York Times*, April 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/25/business/china-covid-zero-economy.html>.

⁶⁰ He Xinrong (何欣荣), Zhou Rui (周蕊), "Problems Repeatedly Exposed in Shanghai's Free Goods and Resources Are Financial Waste and a Blow to Public Trust in Government," [上海免费物资屡曝问题是对财政的浪费, 对政府公信力的伤害], *China Comment*, April 21, 2022, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20220421/20220421A04WUO00.html>.

leaked minutes of an infectious disease experts' meeting dated April 8, 2022, "at present, the vast majority of Shanghai families may not starve to death, but [they have] little surplus food left."⁶¹ The elderly and non-residents of Shanghai were especially vulnerable.⁶² Official media largely stayed away from reporting cases of deaths from hunger and starvation, but physicians used medical euphemisms to record some cases of severe and even fatal malnutrition.⁶³ In these challenging circumstances, neighbors in the communities came together to help each other, oftentimes through barter and the organization of group buying.⁶⁴

The Push for and Growing Fear of the Quarantine

Well before the entire city was put under lockdown, Shanghai had already converted some exhibition centers into quarantine quarters. Yet, the explosive growth in the number of infected individuals far outstripped the growth in supply of quarantine space. Leading medical and public health experts in Shanghai had favored a gentler approach to quarantine. Dr. Chen Erzhen and Dr. Zhang Wenhong, both leaders of medical expert teams in Shanghai, and Dr. Zhu Weiping, an epidemiologist in the Pudong District CDC, all called for allowing some infected individuals to self-isolate at home under certain conditions.⁶⁵ Instead of heeding these expert voices, the political leadership as represented by Sun Chunlan made it imperative to quarantine all individuals who tested positive, plus their close contacts and secondary contacts. In their pursuit of societal zero clearance as soon as possible, they supercharged the political administrative hierarchy plus their affiliates, particularly the residents' committees, to pursue one unbridled mission and indiscriminate campaign. The interests of individuals were treated as an afterthought, and quarantined individuals experienced separation of parents and children, insufficient quarantine sites, poor conditions, and other forms of mistreatment.⁶⁶ Poor conditions and the possibility of an

⁶¹ "Prevention and Control Specialist Communication: Subject: Views on Shanghai and the Nation's Pandemic" [防疫专家交流: 主题: 上海及全国疫情看法], April 8, 2022.

⁶² Storm Zhang, "Save Them!" [求救!!!], China Digital Times, April 8, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/679214.html>.

⁶³ "Shanghai New Deaths Increase to 51, The Details Published!" [上海新增死亡 51 例, 详情公布!], *Health Shanghai 12320 Public Weibo Account*, Weibo post, April 25, 2022, <https://news.sina.com.cn/o/2022-04-25/doc-imcwipii6285596.shtml>.

⁶⁴ Ren Dagang (任大刚), "Since the Lockdown, Repeated Chaos Has Emerged In Shanghai; How On Earth is The City Doing" [封控以来, 上海乱象频出, 这座城市究竟怎么了], Iceberg Institute via NetEase, April 7, 2022, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/H4CAJ5TG0519ADJ3.html>.

⁶⁵ "Expert: The Scale of the Shanghai Pandemic is Greater than Wuhan, But [Patients] With Less Severe Symptoms or No Symptoms Could Isolate at Home" [专家: 上海疫情规模比武汉大但疾病严重性低, 无症状或将可以居家隔离], Eastday.com, April 2, 2022, <https://view.inews.qq.com/k/20220402A01MZJ00?cratype=feiyanh5>; Wenxin Fan, "Shanghai Doctor Speaks Out Against China's Covid Policy, Strikes a Nerve With Weary Public," *Wall Street Journal*, April 7 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/viral-recordings-tap-into-anger-at-shanghais-covid-response-11649243138>; Phone recording on file.

⁶⁶ David Stanway and Brenda Goh, "Shanghai Eases Child Separation Under COVID Policy But Extends Lockdown," Reuters, April 6, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/shanghai-scrambles-secure-food-supplies-covid-lockdown-hits-2022-04-06/>; Lily Kuo, Lyric Li, Vic Chiang and Pei-Lin Wu, "Shanghai's Covid Siege: Food Shortages, Talking Robots, Starving Animals," *Washington Post*, April 15, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/china-shanghai-covid-lockdown-food-shortage>.

incorrect diagnosis created widespread fear of being taken to quarantine and having one's condition aggravated there.⁶⁷ Especially worrisome was being wrongly taken there and then catching Covid.

The “General Offensive”

By early May, the numbers of confirmed and probable Covid cases had both declined precipitously in Shanghai. The city had also learned to cope with the major inconveniences and eased some of the major strains that plagued it in early April. Nonetheless, after more than a month of stringent lockdowns, scarcities, and repeated disappointments with broken official promises, sentiments in a good proportion of residential buildings had also turned less cooperative. The writer “Niupi Mingming” pointed out that Shanghai residents had become less trusting of official announcements and of experts and had turned vigilant against anyone dressed in the white hazmat suit.⁶⁸

Then came the “general offensive.”

On May 6, 2022, the day after a very high-profile Politburo Standing Committee meeting, the Shanghai leadership convened a municipal “mobilization meeting for Resolutely Winning the Battle to Protect Great Shanghai.” District and lower-level leaders made renewed pledges to fulfill specified targets to further bring down the number of confirmed Covid cases.⁶⁹ The district leaders in turn held their own mobilization meetings.

Neighborhood Committee leaders signed their own “military orders” (军令状) for controlling the number of positive cases and in turn allocated the targets by residential subdivisions (包干区).⁷⁰ The order from the Chuansha New Town leadership of Pudong District rallying all cadres and staff gives us a sense of the super-charged war-like atmosphere. It started with a general rally: “We must further unite our hearts, unite as one, continue to exert our strength, and persevere to the end. We must dare to face the virus, dare to fight the virus, dare to be faster than the virus.” It told recipients

⁶⁷ Agnes Chang, Amy Qin, Isabelle Qian and Amy Chang Chien, “Under Lockdown in China,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/04/29/world/asia/shanghai-lockdown.html>; Alexandra Stevenson, “‘Too Smelly To Sleep’: Thirteen Days In a Shanghai Isolation Facility,” *New York Times*, April 15, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/15/world/asia/shanghai-covid-isolation-quarantine.html>.

⁶⁸ “Niupi Mingming” (牛皮明明), “The Biggest Lingering Aftereffect of the Shanghai Pandemic May Be Worse Than the Symptoms” [上海疫情最大的后遗症，比病毒更可怕], NetEase, May 1, 2022, <https://3g.163.com/dy/article/H6AH3S8Q0541NWY5.html>.

⁶⁹ “Encourage Spirit, Establish Military Orders, Attack the Fortress in Spite of Many Difficulties! Municipal Party Committee and Government Convene Mobilization Meeting for Resolutely Winning the Battle to Protect Great Shanghai” [振奋精气神、立下军令状，排除万难冲锋攻坚！市委市政府召开坚决打赢上海保卫战动员大会], *Shanghai Publishes*, May 6, 2022, <https://wsjkw.sh.gov.cn/xwfb/20220506/ced2ac320d7740adab005c591e5801c4.html>.

⁷⁰ Based on specimen of such an order.

to do all they could to identify the infected and their close contacts. Among the list of actions to be pursued: Repeatedly disinfect; take control of individuals and families, including sealing families inside their residences if needed, and “do not be afraid of offending relatives and friends.” The order ended with a call for sacrifice: “it is necessary [for us] to carry out orders and prohibitions with no talk of flexibility, no room for slack, and no loophole out; let everyone be brave, let everyone vie for the lead, and don’t be a coward in this decisive battle for decisive victory; live up to yourself, to Pudong, to the Party and the People!”⁷¹

When authorities ordered residents into a “silence period (靜默期)” and not to step foot outside in stepped-up efforts to “clean out cases,” they condoned lower levels authorities’ use of highly intrusive and alienating tactics as part of this offensive. Fences and barbed wires went up around buildings. When a positive case was identified in an apartment building, all residents in the same building were deemed close contacts or secondary close contacts and removed for quarantine, followed by forced and intensive disinfecting in the homes that compounded the distress on the residents. In some suburban areas, local enforcers locked residents who tested positive inside their residences from the outside.

It should be noted that these extreme tactics had been used in many other cities around China, but few residents of Shanghai had imagined such egregious practices being forced on them. These efforts reinforced the perceptions of many in Shanghai who saw similarities of the anti-covid campaign to excesses of past campaigns in the Mao era, and referred to personnel in white hazmat suits as “White Guards.”

The harsh tactics on residents were met with significant resistance in Shanghai.irate residents shared images and short videos of people deemed to be close contacts being forcibly taken away to quarantine quarters and of their homes and possessions being subjected to indiscriminate disinfecting operations. Building residents plotted to keep individuals who tested positive using rapid antigen tests from taking part in the PCR testing. For many who had borne with forbearance the inconveniences, hardships, and surveillance during the lockdown, the harsh and invasive disinfections “broke the last psychological defense line for the people of China.”⁷²

Faced with widespread public objections, including viral videos and highly public legal challenges,

⁷¹ Screen capture of message from Chuansha New Town; Ch’en Yen-ch’iao (陳言喬), “Shanghai’s 10-Day General Offensive Clearing—Chuansha, Pudong: Control People and Seal Doors, Do Not Be Afraid to Offend Relatives and Friends” [上海 10 日清零總攻 浦東川沙：管人封戶 不怕得罪親朋], *United Daily News*, May 9, 2022, <https://udn.com/news/story/122650/6299155>.

⁷² “Entering Homes to Disinfect Has Destroyed the Last Psychological Line of Defense for Chinese People” [入戶 消杀击溃了中国人最后一道心理防线], Xipo Innovation via *China Digital Times*, May 10, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/681150.html>.

authorities in Shanghai narrowed the scope of the extreme disinfecting practices.⁷³ The State Council JPCM issued updated guidance at the end of May on precise and standardized disinfection and sterilization operations. It called for better training of personnel and “resolutely putting an end” to rough and unstandardized operations.⁷⁴

Discussion and Conclusion

The lockdown of Shanghai for two full months in the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic marked the plateau of China’s protracted zero-Covid campaign. By adopting a relentless approach to pandemic prevention and control, authorities were able to bring down the number of new Covid-19 infections close to zero in Shanghai in May 2022.

In contrast to the celebration that greeted the lifting of the Wuhan lockdown, the de facto Shanghai lockdown ended with a whimper. At the end of May 2022, the Shanghai authorities instructed official media not to use the phrase “reopening” because Shanghai had not officially declared a lockdown or officially closed airports and railway stations in April-May 2022.⁷⁵ Municipal authorities also attempted to claim that draconian community measures were actions taken by residents’ committees under the principle of self-governance and were not explicitly authorized by the municipal authorities.⁷⁶ Gu Wanming, the veteran journalist who revealed these moves, countered that all the *fangkong* measures adopted amid the emergency rule clearly represented the will of the Party-state. Not surprisingly, the credibility of the Shanghai authorities was a major casualty of the official approach to the lockdown. In late May, hundreds of Shanghai residents vented their anger publicly by making donations to the Shanghai branch of the Red Cross in the amount of a paltry 3.27, signifying the date when the initial “quiet management” was imposed.

Looking back, Shanghai’s harrowing experience with COVID-19 in Spring 2022 combined the worst features of mitigation and zero-Covid containment and caused much unnecessary misery

⁷³ Tong Zhiwei (童之伟), “Legal Opinions on Two of Shanghai’s Covid Prevention and Control Measures” [对上海新冠肺炎病毒防疫两措施的法律意见], *Yibao*, May 8, 2022, <https://yibaochina.com/?p=246371>; Liu Dali (刘大力), “Urgently Calling on the Standing Committee of the Shanghai Municipal People’s Congress to Review the Legality and Appropriateness of Pandemic Prevention Measures of Total Quarantine for all Covid Close Contacts in Accordance with the Law, and to Urgently Discuss How to Protect Citizens’ Rights to a Livelihood from Being Violated Amid Pandemic Prevention” [紧急请求上海市人大常委会依法审查新冠密接者全部隔离的防疫措施的合法性和适当性并紧急讨论如何在防疫的同时保障市民的民生权利不被侵犯的建议], *Yibao*, May 8, 2022, <https://yibaochina.com/?p=246387&>.

⁷⁴ “Notice on Further Accuracy and Standardization Launching Covid Prevention, Control and Disinfecting Work” [关于进一步精准规范开展新冠肺炎疫情防控消毒工作的通知], May 31, 2022, PRC National Health Commission via Gov.cn, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2022-05/31/content_5693295.htm.

⁷⁵ “Shanghai Does Not Use the Phrase ‘Lockdown’” [上海不使用‘解封’提法], *China Digital Times*, May 30, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/682345.html>.

⁷⁶ Gu Wanming (顾万明), “Shanghai’s ‘Lockdown’ Was a Mistake and Unbearable for People” [上海“封城”原来是乌龙, 让人情何以堪], *China Digital Times*, May 31, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/682358.html>; 蔡慎坤, “谁把上海人当傻瓜?” *China Digital Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/682421.html>.

and suffering. The harsh measures in Shanghai prompted Dr. Michael Ryan, Executive Director of the WHO Health Emergencies Program, to publicly state that zero-Covid actions should show “due respect to individual and human rights.”⁷⁷ For many Shanghai residents, fear of being summarily forced to go to quarantine quarters by enforcers in hazmat suits replaced fear of becoming infected with Covid. There is little doubt that the de facto lockdown could have been managed more competently to avoid much of the misery in terms of hunger and lack of access to medical services.

The Shanghai lockdown proved revelatory. First, it showed the limitations of the precision *fangkong* model against the hyper-contagious Omicron variant. If Shanghai with its formidable resources and capabilities could not control its Covid outbreak using precision *fangkong* in Spring 2022, it was no surprise most other cities in China were in no position to keep the virus under control without resorting to extremely harsh measures.

Second, the Shanghai lockdown caused massive damages to the economy in Shanghai and the Yangtze River Delta region and offered a painful lesson to the Chinese leadership and especially General Secretary Xi Jinping of the astronomical costs of continuing to pursue a zero-Covid strategy against the Omicron variant. While the national leadership insisted that the lockdown of Shanghai was the politically correct decision from the standpoint of the Communist Party, it was not an outcome anyone wanted to claim credit for. Neither General Secretary and President Xi Jinping nor Premier Li Keqiang set foot in Shanghai during the lockdown or shortly thereafter. With the pursuit of zero-Covid looking increasingly Sisyphean, the Shanghai-style mega-lockdown became a powerful example of what to avoid from the perspective of policymakers.

On November 11, 2022, the State Council JPCM, with the approval of the Politburo, issued what became known as the Twenty Measures to promote precision *fangkong* nationwide. Given the limitations of the Shanghai precision *fangkong* experience, the Twenty Measures marked a major retreat from zero-Covid and unleashed a dynamic political process that ended with the abandonment of zero-Covid in December 2022.

⁷⁷ “COVID-19, Ukraine & Other Global Health Issues Virtual Press Conference,” WHO, May 10, 2022, <https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19--ukraine---other-global-health-issues-virtual-press-conference-transcript---10-may-2022>.



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